

# PROGRESSIVISM, PROFESSIONALISM, AND REFORM

by

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*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the US Army or any other agency of the government.*

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Careerism is a phenomenon which most officers deplore. Indeed, the majority would argue that the careerist's inordinate personal ambition has no place in our profession. Yet despite such disapproval, military careerism continues to thrive—a situation which the officer corps today accepts with startling equanimity.<sup>1</sup>

Periodic revelations such as the recent embarrassing recruiting irregularities make it impossible for us to close our eyes altogether to the persistence of this affliction. And while these particular incidents may have been unusual in detail, the pressures that undoubtedly generated them are widespread. Very few officers are immune to the insistent requirement always to put the best face on things and to give the appearance of superior performance, regardless of the shortcomings that such appearances conceal.

The continued existence of such pressures raises serious questions. What is their source? What is their impact on the officer corps? What can be done about them?

The key to answering these questions lies first in understanding the essential duality of officership. Army officers are members of both a unique profession and a complex organization. By failing to distinguish clearly between the values of their professional fraternity and those of a modern

bureaucracy, soldiers not only deny themselves the true satisfactions of a professional life but also may imperil both the future of their service and the security of the nation. Even a cursory analysis reveals that demands imposed upon officers by the two—profession and organization—are not only distinct, but even antithetical.

## PROFESSIONALISM

The indispensable prerequisite of military professionalism is personal autonomy. Individual commitment—freely undertaken, willingly offered—underlies the professional's dedication to common purposes, shared values, and internally regulated standards of performance. Properly understood, the characteristic demands of the profession do not restrict nor confine; the ordered life of the soldier is, at bottom, positively liberating. It creates opportunities to pursue goals that are more worthwhile and more satisfying than those that of necessity preoccupy most civilians.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of that pursuit, the profession's ethical code, assumes an importance that can scarcely be exaggerated. Certainly, the ethic—embodied in the phrase "Duty, Honor, Country"—establishes basic norms of personal conduct for judging any officer's claim to professional status. Beyond the high levels of technical knowledge and military performance which are of course required, the code separates the true professional from the mercenary or the competent technician. Moreover, it insures the exercise of professional prerogatives in a responsible

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manner. As such, it reassures society that military men and women are worthy of the trust confided in them. The military ethic, in short, constitutes the basic yardstick for measuring professional health. As Samuel P. Huntington has emphasized, "An officer corps is professional *only* to the extent to which its loyalty is to the military ideal."<sup>3</sup>

But soldiers can adhere to their ethic, and thus succeed professionally, only insofar as their environment permits. Sustained by autonomous commitment, the profession cannot abide pressures that reduce the freedom of its members to direct their own conduct, subject only to the demands of the military ethic. Unfortunately, by placing increasing emphasis on bureaucratic values over the past 75 years, the Army has denied its officers precisely this freedom.

### PROGRESS OR PROBLEM?

Students of Army history have long pointed to the organizational reforms of Secretary of War Elihu Root as a watershed in military professionalization. Following the Spanish-American War, Root—in the name of efficiency, economy, and "scientific management"—transformed a troubled, backward, 19th-century Army into a modern organization. Root's achievements were once interpreted as those of an exemplary conservative somehow surviving in a flood of Progressivism. More recently, however, historians have recognized that the Root reforms themselves were indistinguishable from the main thrust of Progressivism. They formed part of the "bureaucratic revolution" then sweeping the country.<sup>4</sup> Army reformers based their efforts on the thesis that "military problems, like corporate and public problems, could be solved through effective organization and management."<sup>5</sup> As such, their program merely constituted another aspect of the "era's general groping towards a satisfactory expression of the bureaucratic method of administration and control."<sup>6</sup>

The Root reforms did eliminate serious defects that plagued the Army. By viewing the reforms as the trigger of continuing bureaucratization, however, we can in

retrospect better measure at what cost to professionalism these gains were purchased. That cost is most easily assessed when viewing the Army from an institutional perspective. Our service currently provides an example of what Samuel P. Hays has called a "technical system"—a centralized bureaucratic mechanism for molding "highly specialized individuals" into a "coordinated work force."<sup>7</sup> The technical system's most distinguishing feature is a relentless drive to assert absolute control over its environment. From the individual's point of view, this impulse takes the form of demands for the reduction of the personal autonomy so essential to professionalism. Obligated to accommodate the system, the individual submits to a coercive "pattern of dominance and subordination."<sup>8</sup> Survival within the system requires conformity. The "modern" Army, which was Root's principal bequest, by severely circumscribing each officer's autonomy undercut the basis for his spontaneous adherence to the professional ethic. It is more than mildly ironic that Root's reorganization of the Army, so often cited as a milestone of professionalization, actually deprived officers of the freedom needed to pursue a genuinely professional course.<sup>9</sup>

This conflict between organizational and professional imperatives has not gone unnoticed. During the Vietnam War, the tendency of institutional demands to override ethical considerations provoked widespread concern within the officer corps. Critics such as David Hackworth, Edward L. King, and Josiah Bunting argued that military professionalism had become one more casualty of the war. Careerism, many complained, had reached epidemic proportions.

### SOLUTION—OR PART OF THE PROBLEM?

For its part, the Army displayed a remarkable sensitivity to the indictments of widespread careerism coming from the ranks of the officer corps in the war's later stages. Such overt discontent, suggesting a deeper

erosion of its institutional authority, made the service decidedly uncomfortable. As a result, the Army implemented a series of "reforms," in some ways the most ambitious since those of the Root era. The most important of those reforms, the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS), had two contradictory objectives. On the one hand, OPMS aimed to root out careerism and inaugurate a full-scale regeneration of professionalism. On the other hand, OPMS would also bolster any cracks in the system's authority and control.

As an exercise in co-optation the measures succeeded admirably. They defused officer dissatisfaction and checked any inclination on the part of the officer corps to assert itself against the system's demands. Yet as remedies for defective military professionalism, the reforms have proven cosmetic and ineffective. Careerist concerns still tug at the average officer no less than they did a decade ago. Careerism has more than survived—it flourishes.

It is easy enough to dismiss careerism, as some do sin, by merely ascribing it to individual moral imperfection. It is that. But careerism is much more than a personal lapse in adherence to an ethical code. It reflects the frustrating dilemma confronting soldiers forced to choose between the profession's traditional ethic and the behavior required to survive within the organization. Officer preoccupation with careerist pursuits—rank, awards, assignments—simply testifies to the technical system's capacity for persuading erstwhile professionals to accede to its own demands.

## THE ROLE OF COMPETITION

What accounts for the organization's success in extracting such deference? The answer lies in recognizing the uses which the organization makes of competition. No longer merely the characteristically American spur toward personal and professional excellence, competition has become the lever which the "technical system" employs to control the career soldier. Virtually from the day officers receive their commissions, the

Army impresses upon them the importance of remaining "competitive." Military professionals quickly learn—must learn—to respect those organizational benchmarks established as indicators of competitiveness: efficiency reports, schools, awards, promotions, prestigious assignments—the typical careerist agenda.

To stimulate competition, the institution further misleads officers by actually defining military professionalism in terms of such ephemeral status symbols. The true measures of professionalism should be *who you are* and *how well you do your job*, not *who you are becoming* and *what you are doing*. The latter are the values of the careerist concerned only with his position in the organizational hierarchy.

Nor does the service merely "encourage" officers to compete. Rather, it uses the competitive ethic in an explicitly coercive manner. While incentives to compete may be either positive or negative, the latter have the decided advantage of being both explicit and more immediately relevant. Recognizing that to become noncompetitive is to risk exclusion from the profession altogether, the prudent officer feels compelled to give careful attention to the institution's performance cues. Certainly, the involuntary separations of recent years have made that point clear to even the least attentive. Those officers who failed to move "up" have simply moved "out." But the competitive system affects more than just that minority liable to be caught in a force reduction. *All* officers labor under continuous pressure to ascend the

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rungs of a "career plan" largely not of their own making. Upon receipt of a single, less-than-spectacular efficiency report or nonselection by any of the anonymous boards periodically scrutinizing him, the officer is tagged—however unfairly—as one who has somehow not quite measured up. Most cruelly, in his own eyes, too, he may have "failed." By convincing most career soldiers of the overriding importance of moving "up," Army personnel managers keep their charges manageable, if not altogether docile.<sup>10</sup>

**T**he essential point is simply that such competition corrupts. It creates an unhealthy tension that few officers can escape. The inclination to adhere to the profession's ethical code yields to the gnawing realization that the officer must also satisfy the institutional demand to remain competitive, if only out of self-preservation. Any reform, whatever its intent, will leave careerism unaffected if, like OPMS, it fails to reduce the emphasis placed on the competitive ethic.

For in reality, OPMS has only guaranteed that the competition will be "fair." By promising all starters an equal chance to win, the organization assures itself that few competitors will become prematurely discouraged in the race for status.<sup>11</sup> By insuring vigorous, but "fair" competition, OPMS has merely remodeled the facade of the system's customary mechanism for maintaining the tractability of the officer corps.

The system remains today as it has long been. The fierce competitiveness of the officer corps still breeds careerism, the very inverse of professionalism. Assertions of our dedication to the military ethic will ring hollow even to our own ears so long as careerism exists. It should hardly be surprising, however, that reforms proposed by the institution failed even to address seriously the implications of competition. Assuming that the Army behaves essentially like any other bureaucracy, one could hardly expect it to advocate reforms that endanger

its authority within its own realm. After all, the competitive ethic's coercive authority constitutes the foundation of the organization's control over its membership. The institution's leverage on individual officers is proportional to the latter's commitment to preserving their competitive standing.

Perhaps there is no sure-fire way to eradicate careerism. We certainly must not naively ignore how deeply competitive values have burrowed into our beliefs and attitudes. Certainly, ambition predates the rise of the modern bureaucracy. And the vanities of military life distracted soldiers long before Elihu Root arrived at the War Department.

### TOWARD GENUINE REFORM

Yet even if we cannot reform human nature, we can at least purge our environment of existing obstacles to professionalism. That alone constitutes an ambitious objective, one that will require more than superficial tinkering to achieve. If we are seriously committed to restoring the professional ethic to a position of commanding influence in military life, we must first recognize the necessity for substantive, even radical, change. As Eugene Genovese has written in another context, "To have a world without marketplace values you must have a world without a marketplace at its center."<sup>12</sup> The exclusion of careerism from the military profession will require that we reassess our usual passive acceptance of the competitive ethic.

If the organization's dependence upon competition makes it unlikely that the Army itself will ever undertake such a reexamination, then professional regeneration must come from within. The officer corps must become sensitive to the aspirations and attitudes which the organization promulgates for its own purposes. Officers must begin challenging those values, imposed by the bureaucracy, which are intrinsically anti-professional. They must assert their autonomy as practicing professionals and forthrightly accept their responsibility for directing that

profession rather than tamely acquiescing to guidance from above. They must, in effect, remove themselves from the marketplace of military careerism.

Such an ambitious program of collective action by professional soldiers is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first glance. In this regard, the success of the Promotion Research Committee (PRC)—albeit in the pursuit of careerist objectives—is instructive. The PRC clearly demonstrated that officers with sufficient determination and audacity can make themselves heard. Perhaps the officer corps will take the first step toward professional rejuvenation when it establishes a new PRC, campaigning, however, not for “Promotion” but for “Professionalism.”

**R**eal change in our professional climate will not come easily, but it is a worthwhile goal. An officer corps motivated more by the enduring principles of the professional ethic and less by concern for personal aggrandizement will better serve the nation. That much is self-evident. Moreover, a renewed commitment to ethical values would signal a new maturity in the officer corps. It would go far toward restoring to military life some of the dignity and respect it has lost in recent years. Furthermore, a rejection of transient careerist considerations in favor of ethical values would make our way of life altogether less frustrating and more satisfying. It would make us not only better soldiers but better men and women.

That a military establishment reflects the society that spawned it is a cliché. Today's Army, tracing its origins to the Progressive era, bears the imprint of many of the assumptions and characteristics of 20th-century American liberalism. Once the object of near universal admiration, that creed in recent years has become the target of profound criticism. We now recognize our misplaced confidence in the potential of liberal reform, which has repeatedly failed to make good on its promises. America's domestic and international travails of the past decade, for example, testify to the bankruptcy of liberalism's attempts to

engineer a “great society” or a congenial world order. Furthermore, presumably benevolent liberalism, in its old age, has revealed a hitherto unsuspected character: it is rigid, arrogant, and universalistic. Although a final judgment may be premature, the liberal credo has seemingly reached the limits of its usefulness.

**A**merican society then may be on the verge of laying its Progressive heritage to rest. As it embarks on a search for more relevant organizing principles, the military profession should do likewise. Perhaps by recognizing now the limitations of “scientific management,” competition, and bureaucracy, the Army officer corps will not turn away from society but move with it in tandem. And to the extent that society might find some use for those traditional values to which the military must return, ethical regeneration may provide our profession with an opportunity for leadership on a scale truly without precedent.<sup>13</sup>

#### NOTES

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1. A careerist is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a person . . . who is mainly interested in the furtherance of his career, often in an unscrupulous manner.” As used herein, careerism is the debasing of professional standards of conduct and integrity in order to promote self-interest.

2. John Winthrop Hackett, *The Military in the Service of the State* (Colorado Springs: US Air Force Academy, 1971), pp. 17-18.

3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 74. Emphasis in the original.

4. Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 149.

5. Jack C. Lane, “The Military Profession's Search For Identity,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, 57 (June 1973), 40.

6. Russell F. Weigley, “The Elihu Root Reforms and the Progressive Era,” in William Geffen, ed., *Command and Commanders in Modern Warfare* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1971), p. 24.

7. Samuel P. Hays, “Introduction,” in Jerry Israel, ed., *Building the Organizational Society*, (New York: The Free Press, 1972), p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

9. In an article appearing after the body of this paper was written, Adam Yarmolinsky addresses the common dilemma of all professionals confronted with incompatible bureaucratic demands. “The professional in a bureaucratic setting,” he argues, “may, and not infrequently will, find himself in a

conflict of interest between the concerns of the client organization and the concerns of individuals within the organization." See "What Future for the Professional in American Society?" *Daedalus*, 107 (Winter 1978), 164.

10. To make such an assertion is not to suggest the existence of a sinister institutional conspiracy. Army bureaucrats are as much the system's victims as they are its agents. The organization's needs must be served.

11. William Hauser's assessment of OPMS has emphasized this function. "To ensure that non-selection for command does

not spell the end of competitiveness," he observes, "selection policies for promotions and high-level appointments are designed to provide 'many roads to the top.'" See "The Peacetime Army: Retrospect and Prospect," in Robin Higham and Carol Brandt, ed., *The United States Army in Peacetime* (Manhattan, Kansas: Military Affairs/Aerospace Publishing, 1975), p. 217.

12. Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), p. 242.

13. Huntington, pp. 464-66.

